

## Sport Aurora's Breakfast of Champions celebrates success of 150 local athletes and coaches



Sport Aurora celebrated the achievements of 150 athletes and coaches at its annual Breakfast of Champions at Stonehaven Banquet Hall on Sunday morning.

Mayor Tom Mrakas was pleased to present awards to the deserving recipients and extolled the lessons learned by young athletes through association with local sports teams.

It's great to be here and celebrate the achievements of our sporting community. Sports aren't just about winning; it's about teamwork, cooperation, and achieving the best you can be. It's incredible to see our champions here today and to celebrate so many championships won by individuals and teams associated with our local sports organizations.

An introductory video revved up all participants as the following sports organizations were recognized:

Master Ducks Swimming; Kids Super Gym; Shaolin Martial Arts Club; Redbirds Lacrosse Club; York Artistic Swimming Club; Spectrum North Baton Club; Global Gymnastics; Evolution Gymnastics; Aurora Barbarians Rugby Football Club; Special Olympics Ontario; and the Team Ontario Astros.

Aurora Tigers owner and former NHLer Jim Thomson served as Master of Ceremonies for the seventh consecutive year. The colorful and engaging emcee, sporting a golden Gucci jacket with red and blue accents, introduced the event's keynote speaker, Andrew Kooger.

The avid mountain biker, whose catastrophic accident on the biking trails at Horseshoe Valley left him a paraplegic, offered an inspirational tale to the young athletes and coaches assembled.

I thought I lost everything; I lost what I identified as: a banker and a mountain biker.

Kooger described his grueling rehabilitation and the turning point when he could finally sit up on the edge of a hospital bed.

He referred to his newly-released book, *Defy the Odds*, which encapsulates his journey back to the financial world and his return to his much-loved mountain biking.

"I learned that the hardships do not define who you are and do not define your life. I've returned to my job in finance, co-founded a supplements and nutrition company Maximus Athletics, and I've returned to the trails as an adaptive mountain biker. I even returned to the trails at Horseshoe Valley to conquer my fears. Through it all, I took ownership."

A passionate advocate for adaptive sports, Kooger shared his love of mountain biking "as an important outlet" and expressed his gratitude about having the opportunity to be a keynote speaker."

In addition to promoting *Defy the Odds* in a current book tour and delivering keynote addresses, Kooger is positioning himself for "the Paralympics in 2028 in LA" and encouraged his audience to "battle through the dark storms of your life. Let the inner athlete define your purpose in life."

Emcee Thomson was flanked by Tigers player and Aurora resident Tristan Abel, Tigers Coach James Thomson, Tigers player and Aurora resident Luc Warner, and Mayor Mrakas who presented the Excellence Award to Kooger as a keepsake. Warner and Abel are two of four local residents playing for the Aurora Junior A Tigers this season. Both assisted with seating guests and the distribution of awards as the OJHL team's connection to community was evident.

Thomson asked Aurora Sports Hall of Fame inductee Alan Dean to introduce Sport Aurora's 2024 Coach of the Year.

The honor went to Aurora Diggers Head Coach Todd Martin whose impressive resume includes a 450-120-22 record in his twelve years at the helm.

Coach Martin, a member of the International Softball Hall of Fame, has participated in six world championship events and guided his Diggers to a silver medal at the recent U19 Canadian championships.

Currently, ten Diggers are on NCAA scholarships thus displaying the efficacy of the Town's local softball program.

Dean also announced that Sport Aurora's 2024 Athlete of the Year was Olympic Rugby Silver Medalist and Aurora Barbarians star Chloe Daniels.

The Belle of the Ball, who led her upstart national rugby football squad to unprecedented heights and an improbable podium finish at the Paris Olympics this summer, was unable to attend due to her recent ACL surgery.

The talented flyback scored the winning try in the final minute of play to defeat heavily-favored France 19-14 in the Olympic semifinals. Remarkably, the first-time Olympian scored nine of Team Canada's points in the victory over the host team in front of 70,000 fans.

Nick Daniels accepted the award for his recuperating daughter.

**By Jim Stewart**